

Opinions

Kashmir, the Imperiled Paradise

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For more than 50 years, India and Pakistan have been arguing and periodically coming to blows over one of the most beautiful places in the world, Kashmir, which the Mughal emperors thought of as Paradise on earth.

As a result of this unending quarrel, Paradise has been partitioned, overished and made violent. Murder and terrorism now stalk the valleys and mountains of a land once so famous for its peacefulness that outsiders made jokes about the Kashmiris' supposed lack of fighting spirit.

I have a particular interest in the Kashmir issue because I am more than half Kashmiri myself, because I have loved the place all my life and because I have spent much of that life listening to successive Indian and Pakistani governments, all of them more or less venal and corrupt, mouthing the self-serving hypocrisies of power while ordinary Kashmiris suffered the consequences of their posturings.

Pity those ordinary, peaceable people caught between the rock of India and the hard place that Pakistan has always been!

And, as the world's newest nuclear powers square off yet again, their new weapons making their dialogue of the deaf more dangerous than ever before, I say, A plague on both their houses.

"Kashmir for the Kashmiris" is an old slogan, but the only one that expresses how the subjects of this dispute have always felt; how, I believe, the majority of them would still say they feel, if they were free to speak their minds without fear.

India has badly mishandled the Kashmir case from the beginning. Back in 1947 the state's Hindu maharaja "opted" for India, and in spite of United Nations resolutions supporting the largely Muslim population's right to a plebiscite, India's leaders have always rejected the idea, repeating over and over that Kashmir is "an integral part" of India. (The Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is itself of Kashmiri origin.)

India has maintained a large standing military presence in Kashmir for decades, both in the Vale of Kashmir where most of the population is based and in mountain fastnesses like the site of the present flashpoint. This force feels to most Kashmiris like an occupying army and is greatly resented.

Yet until recently the generality of Indians, even the liberal intelligentsia, refused to face up to the reality of Kashmiris' growing animosity toward them. As a result, the problem has grown steadily worse, greatly exacerbated by laws that threatened long jail sentences for any Kashmiri making anti-Indian statements in public.

Pakistan, for its part, has from its earliest times been a heavily militarized state, dominated by the army even when under notionally civilian rule and spending a huge part of its budget -- at its peak, around half the total budgetary expenditure -- on its armed forces. Such spending, and the consequent might of the generals, depends on having a dangerous enemy to defend against and a "hot" cause to pursue.

It has therefore always been in the interest of Pakistan's top brass to frustrate peacemaking initiatives toward India and to keep the Kashmir dispute alive. This, and not the alleged interests of Kashmiris, is what lies behind Pakistan's policy on the issue.

These days, in addition, the Pakistani authorities are under pressure from their country's mullahs and radical Islamists, who characterize the struggle to "liberate" (that is, to seize) Kashmir as a holy war. But Kashmiri Islam has always been of the mild, Sufistic variety, in

which local pirs, holy men, are revered as saints. This open-hearted, tolerant Islam is anathema to the firebrands of Pakistan and might well, under Pakistani rule, be at risk.

Thus, the present-day growth of terrorism in Kashmir has roots in India's treatment of Kashmiris, but it has equally deep roots in Pakistan's interest in subversion. Yes, Kashmiris feel strongly about the Indian "occupation" of their land; but it is also almost certainly true that Pakistan's army and intelligence service have been training, aiding and abetting the men of violence.

The fact that India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons makes urgent the need to move beyond the deadlock and the moribund 50-year-old language of the crisis. What Kashmiris want, and what India and Pakistan must be persuaded to offer them, is a reunited land, an end to Lines of Control and warfare on high Himalayan glaciers.

What they want is to be given a large degree of autonomy; to be allowed to run their own lives.

The Kashmir dispute has already exposed the frailty of the cold war theory of nuclear deterrence, according to which the extreme danger of nuclear arsenals should deter those who possess them from embarking even on a conventional war. That thesis now seems untenable. It was probably not deterrence that prevented the cold war from turning hot, but luck.

So here we are in a newly dangerous world, in which nuclear powers actually are going to war. In such a time, it is essential that the special-case status of Kashmir be recognized and used as the basis of the way forward. The Kashmir problem must be defused once and for all, or else, in the unthinkable worst-case scenario, it may end in the nuclear destruction of Paradise itself, and of much else besides.

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